Kimzey House Near Tamaroa

Historic Home Hid Slaves

By Mary Reifschneider
Of The Southern Illinoisan

Calvin Ibendahl couldn't have picked a better home for his bride seven years ago than the old Kimzey place, south of Tamaroa on Rt. 51.

The old Kimzey place as area residents call it, was built in 1854 or 1856. It has become a fascinating home for Mrs. Ibendahl, a former history teacher, to rediscover and gather facts and artifacts about the home's original owner, B. G. Roots and life in pre-Civil War Southern Illinois.

Benajah Guernsey Roots was a pioneer educator and abolitionist who moved from New England to Illinois in 1837. Father Roots, as he was commonly called, settled first in Shawneetown and then moved to a farm south of Tamaroa.

Log Cabin

There he built a log cabin that served both as his home and as the first school in the area. He operated Locust Hill Academy in his home from 1839 to 1846 when he took charge of the Sparta Seminary, where he remained until 1851.

One of Roots' early students was John A. Logan, Murphysboro native who became a general in the Civil War.

Roots stopped teaching briefly in 1851 to do survey work for the Illinois Central railroad. Mrs. Ibendahl said he was responsible for routing the IC from Centralia to Tamaroa.

Free School Law

Following the completion of the railroad work, he began lobbying for passage of the Free School Law of 1855. Father Roots is also given credit for helping start the Illinois State Teachers Association in 1853 and served once as the group's president.

Roots lobbied in favor of the normal schools in Illinois and helped secure passage of the law that established Southern Illinois University. In 1865 he was appointed to the Illinois board of education and remained on the board until his death in 1887.

As an abolitionist, Roots became part of the underground railroad in Illinois.

The second cabin Roots built on his Tamaroa farm had a hollow brick wall to hide runaway slaves. His third home, Locust Hill Mansion, with its 12 large rooms provided ample room to hide slaves.

Cisterns

Mrs. Ibendahl said one of the three water cisterns in the basement was never used, and the Ibendahls found a large hole under the floor in one of the barns Roots built that could have hidden slaves.

Old rumors say an underground tunnel was also dug somewhere on the original 1,200-acre farm.

Roots used his influence to have the railroad curve north of Sunfield and take it by Locust Hill. Mrs. Ibendahl said this is possibly where runaway slaves got off trains for sanctuary in the Roots' home.

Other buildings on Roots' farm also housed runaway slaves. Mrs. Ibendahl said the runaways who came to the Roots' home were from Missouri. They came into Illinois at Chester, and were taken to Sparta and then to Locust Hill. The next stop was Richview.

Abolitionist Roots wasn't too popular with his neighbors. Once Tamaroa residents threatened to tar and feather him, but he disappeared for a few days, Mrs. Ibendahl said.

Some of the runaway slaves returned to the Roots' farm after the Civil War and built homes. Some are buried on a wooded area of the farm.

For allowing the railroad to go across his land, Roots and his descendants, the Kimzeys, were allowed to stop the train and ride it to Tamaroa.

According to old stories, Mrs. Kimzey, Roots' daughter and a semi-invalid, had the train stop at Locust Hill when she wanted to go to Tamaroa. Mrs. Kimzey, so the story goes, had her rocking chair put on a flatcar and rode in the open to Tamaroa.

Locust Hill was a stock farm where pure bred horses and registered cattle and hogs were raised. Roots also planted 40 different kinds of trees on the farm. Mrs. Ibendahl said 38 different kinds still remain.

Roots turned over Locust Hill to his son-in-law, Walter Kimzey, and moved to Little Rock, Ark., during the Civil War. He established the First National Bank in Little Rock.

Roots later returned to Locust Hill, where he died in 1887.

The Kimzeys kept the farm until 1905. The house has not been altered very much. An elevator has been removed and bathrooms added where the shaft was.

A wall between the front parlor and library was removed before the Ibendahls moved in. The large room is now a meeting room for the Perry County Historical Society.

Historical documents and artifacts the society owns are housed there. The room also contains a rocking chair that belonged to Roots, and a portrait of Roots and a painting of his second house.

In rummaging through the attic, Mrs. Ibendahl has found two of the original fireplace fronts the house once had. She was able to restore one, and has it in a bedroom.

She has also found some of the original inside window shutters which she is now using.

Relatives of Mrs. Rosamond Kimzey Forester, Roots' youngest granddaughter, found a box containing old ledgers, pictures and newspapers with a note written by Roots explaining that the box is a "temporary deposit, part of the things I thought might be wished for future relics to show the children."

Mrs. Ibendahl has refurnished the house with antiques from the area. While working in a garden where the first Roots cabin stood, Mrs. Ibendahl found some old coins and a china head of a doll and arm, which she has on display in the meeting room.

Mrs. Ibendahl has antique furnishings in all the bedrooms. One room, originally used as a clothes closet and storage room, now houses a school room, complete with old maps and desks.

Mrs. Ibendahl has a replica of the Santa Maria ship, complete with the Virgin Mary's picture on display in the school room. The ship was found in the attic.

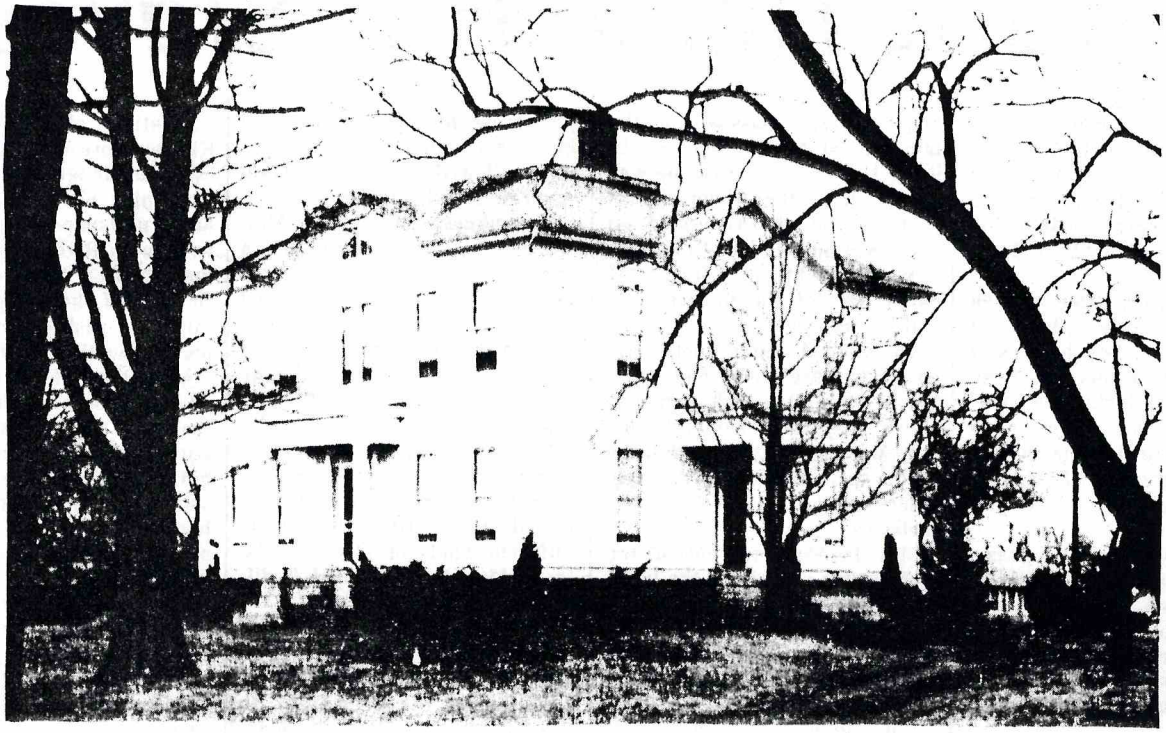
All the floors on the second floor are the original ones built when the house was new. The house today has nine rooms instead of the original 12.

Steps in the attic lead to a widow's walk on the roof. A servant's staircase to the second floor and steps dealing to the attic and widow's walk have never been altered.

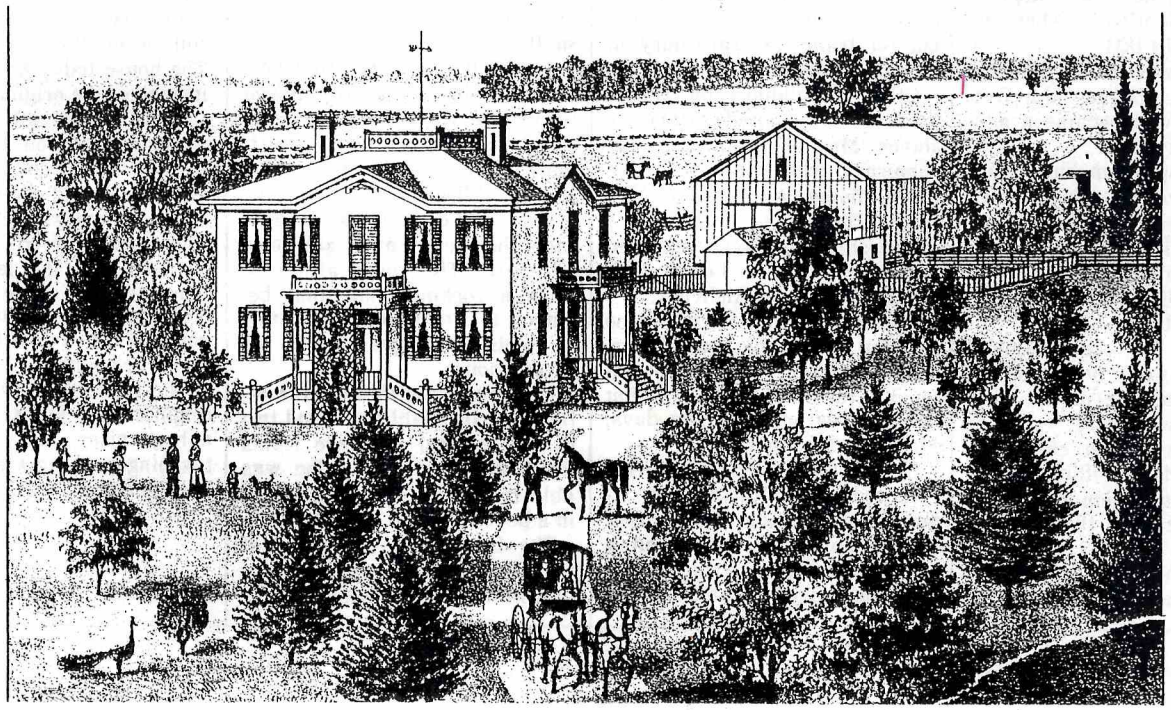
Nearly all the lamps in the Ibendahl home are made from old jugs, bottles and cream cans Mrs. Ibendahl found at the house or bought.

The Ibendahl's own 580 of the original 1,200 acres. Ibendahl is a hog raiser. Mrs. Ibendahl is teaching part time at Du Quoin High School.

House at Tamaroa Holds Secrets of Fleeing Slaves



LITTLE CHANGE is noted in the B. G. Roots (Kimsey) home in Tamaroa today. A patch of grass in the front lawn which does not match the rest of the three-acre yard is thought to be over an underground tunnel used at the home over 100 years ago to hide runaway slaves. The Illinois Central runs across the property and the trains used to stop there. Roots is purported to have engineered the laying of the tracks on his property so the trains could stop there and he could load slaves on board unseen. The building now serves as home to the Calvin Ibendahls and as a museum for the Perry County Historical Society. It is open to the public.



TAMAROA HAVEN FOR RUNAWAYS—The B. G. Roots home, a mile south of Tamaroa on Rte. 51, served as shelter and shield for freedom-seeking slaves more than 100 years ago. The structure, above as it appeared to an artist in the 1800s, was built when Roots, a well known Illinois educator and abolitionist, came from Connecticut and settled in the heart of southern sympathizers before the Civil War. The then 1,000-acre farm took the name of the "Kimsey place" when a man named Kimsey married Roots' daughter and they settled down to housekeeping there.